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ABSTRACT

In 1993, adult education (AE) researchers from 12 Canadian universities were asked to report on research trends at their respective institutions at the annual conference of the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE). The reports were analyzed to characterize and differentiate AE research trends at the universities. Among the study's main findings were the following: (1) organizational variables (faculty groupings, types of programs offered, administrative policy) have a significant effect on the scope and nature of academic research activities in AE at Canadian universities; (2) the recent trend at Canadian universities toward integration of AE within other administrative units has translated into less basic and emancipatory research and more applied research; (3) AE research is dominated by qualitative research methodologies, with content analysis, interpretive inquiry, and ethnographic designs the preferred methodological choices; (4) internal funding represents more than half the resources available to researchers for conducting research; and (5) because the overwhelming majority of AE research projects supported by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada are in the funding category Education and Work in a Changing Society, most current research in adult education is confined to a limited set of short-term economic (work-related) topics. (12 references) (MN)

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# ADULT EDUCATION RESEARCH TRENDS IN CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES: AN UPDATE TO THE 1993 (OTTAWA) CASAE REPORTS

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ABSTRACT: It is possible to identify certain trends in adult education research in Canadian universities. There are areas of intense activity, as well as some important gaps in research interests. Significant polarizations were found between the various organizations' views of the purposes and applications of research in adult education.

RÉSUMÉ: Il est possible d'identifier certaines tendances de la recherche en éducation des adultes dans les universités canadiennes. Certains secteurs connaissent une activité intense, alors qu'il existe ailleurs des lacunes importantes. Les organisations consultées présentent une vision polarisée des obje ts et applications de la recherche en éducation des adultes.

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In 1993, adult education researchers from 12 Canadian universities were asked to submit reports describing research trends in their respective institutions. The resulting papers were presented at the 12th annual CASAE Conference (Ottawa, 1993), and at the 61st ACFAS Conference (Rimouski, 1993). No operational definition of what constitutes a "trend" was given, and the researchers had no standard outline to work with. Consequently, it has been difficult to summarize the findings according to a common framework. Nevertheless, after sifting through the reports, I found it possible to offer a general overview, and to identify some tendencies concerning the state of Canadian university research in adult education. As a doctoral student at the time of my perusal of the CASAE Reports, my personal perspective has been that of naive discovery of the labyrinthine and somewhat perplexing world of university research. Some of the following observations may seem trivial or self-evident to more experienced academics, but represent genuine breakthroughs in my own awareness of the field.

For the purpose of this analysis, I retained four dimensions to characterize and differentiate adult education research trends in Canadian universities:

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1) Organizational variables;
2) Objects of Research;
3) Research methodologies;
4) Funding.

These four categories account for some similarities, and some important differences between research agendas carried out in Canadian post-secondary institutions.

## 1. Organizational Variables

One important organizational variable that seems to affect research is the institutional orientation of each university administration. As part of their positioning and marketing plans, postsecondary establishments routinely issue policy orientations and mission statements. For example, some of

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the larger, better endowed Canadian universities have declared their attachment to such goals as "excellence" and "distinction", while other institutions have expressed values that are more commonly in tune with social development and community service. It appears that the more elitist aims ("distinction", "excellence", etc.) tend to foster competitive environments for researchers, and to attract more research funds. On the other hand, institutions that are committed to "wider access", and that describe themselves as "community oriented" hold a lower priority when it comes to securing support from granting agencies. This phenomenon is so widespread that we can legitimately speak of two "classes" of institutions, one of them having better access to research funds than the other. Nevertheless, professor-researchers in both types of institutions are expected to carry out a full scholarly agenda as part of their normal workload. This unequal access to funding, in turn, affects the type of research that is carried out (see below, "Funding").

Universities that offer doctoral programs appear to have an additional edge when it comes to procuring research resources. Funding agencies typically take into account the trickle-down effect of their grants on graduate students, in effect killing two "birds" with one stone (i.e. funding research AND providing financial aid to students). Departments that offer M.A. programs do not seem to benefit from a comparable advantage, in part because the involvement of professor-researchers with doctoral and post-doctoral training is considered an important criterion for successful grantsmanship. (How many doctoral students have YOU supervised in the past?)

Another significant organizational variable with an impact on research seems to be the departmental and disciplinary affiliation of the researchers. In Canadian universities, specific departmental units that specialize in adult education have been vanishing at an alarming rate. Rather, the trend in the past years has been to integrate adult education within the structures of other departments such as Education, Extension, Counseling, etc. This tendency has resulted in the polarization of interests between researchers who profess an allegiance to the historical emancipatory purposes of adult education in Canada, and those involved with the daily concerns of performance-oriented training programs and methods. This split between "rational-technical", and "ethical-transformative" purposes of adult education has been observed, among others, by Blunt (1993). It seems that the integration of adult education within other administrative units translates into less basic and emancipatory research, and more applied research. This is due in part to the fact that these units are populated with researchers whose primary focus is on a specific disciplinary content, rather than on dimensions more generally related to adult learning. Another implication of these organizationally dictated "forced marriages" is that much of the research being done is not being designated by the term "adult education". For example, when asked about the state of research in adult education at Québec's Télé-Université, Deschênes (1993) wrote that there was "little, if any, specific research in that area" conducted at that institution. Ironically, Télé-Université is well-known for its pioneering work in distance education, which caters almost exclusively to adult populations.

2. Objects of Research

In her 1988 inventory of Canadian adult education research, MacKeracher found three categories of research interests, concerned mainly with (1) the adult learners; (2) the adult educators; and (3) the management and organization of adult education. After reviewing the 1993 CASAE reports, it appears that the third area, "management and organization", is the one with the lowest level of activity. In this vein, figures compiled by Kopps (1993) could be indicative of a more generalized trend. They show that research at University of Manitoba is concentrated mainly on educational practice (31%) and the teacher-learner transaction (36%). One important exception to this trend is the Center for Policy Research at UBC, where Rubenson (1993) reports an appreciable level of activity in the area of policy research.

According to MacKeracher, Chapman, and Gillen (1993), research into the characteristics and needs of adult learners has tended to become more differentiated over time. For example, previous studies in the area of "adult basic education" have been followed by more precisely defined research topics such as "literacy", "first and second language education", "numeracy", etc. Similarly, earlier studies concerned with education and "underprivileged groups" have given rise to more specific research interests such as "women as learners", "native Canadians", "young adults", etc.

One myth that was dispelled after reading the CASAE Reports was the reputation of Canadian adult education scholars as earnest patrons of critical and transformative research paradigms. It is true that adult education in Canada is rooted in a heritage of emancipatory social action and popular initiatives, in the tradition of the Antigonish Movement, the Radio Farm Forums, the Mouvement Desjardins, etc. These historical movements have inspired some Canadian scholars to write from a critical, liberatory perspective. This in turn has led to adult education researchers being criticized for pursuing such high-minded ideals as the advancement of "critical consciousness" and "community awareness", at the expense of more materially relevant concerns such as "economic development" and other sundry items on the postmodern capitalistic agenda. However, according to reports by Burnaby (1993), Blunt (1993), and Blais (1993) among others, it appears that such charges have been largely overstated. In fact, the bulk of adult education research projects undertaken both by professor-researchers and graduate students in Canadian universities appears to be primarily concerned with utilitarian applications. University faculty, no doubt in response to recent shifts in funding policy, have been typically involved in "strategic" and "pragmatic" research projects. Graduate students, on their part, overwhelmingly pursue research in areas closely related to their professional practice. Interestingly, the majority of adult education students are women, but there seems to be little overall interest in feminist frameworks. Of course, a wide range of faculty and student interests are represented in this sampling, and it is difficult to generalize. One relatively safe observation, however, would be that the "utilitarian" vs "critical" (including feminist) research paradigms are distributed unevenly among specific institutions. Indeed, certain establishments emerge as notably fertile hotbeds of social dissent, with a strong focus on participatory, emancipatory, and feminist research agendas. In other institutions, researchers and graduate students pursue more conservative research interests, concentrating on work-related issues and competency-based problems.

The tendency to direct funding towards "utilitarian" research has been at the root of some peculiar aberrations. For example, MacKeracher, Chapman, and Gillen (1993) relate an instance where funds were allocated for research that was clearly aimed at providing support for an ongoing government program. The impression was that the study's goal was to dispense an academic rubber-stamp for government policies of otherwise questionable fabric.

3. Research Methodologies

As is the case in most other areas of educational research, inquiry in adult education is dominated by qualitative research methodologies. Content analysis, interpretive inquiry, and ethnographic designs seem to be among the preferred methodological choices of researchers. Generally, qualitative methods are deemed more useful for investigation into the complex and subjective world of adult education. Conversely, empirical data derived from statistics, surveys, etc. are understood to be of doubtful value when it comes to studying human perceptions and their social/educational implications. One exception to this otherwise nation-wide trend is found at Université de Montréal, where Blais (1993) reports an *increase* in empirical research designs, primarily among graduate students.

Strangely, and somewhat ironically, the researchers themselves are the first to acknowledge that funding agencies generally hold an opposite view, whereby research that is not supported by "hard" facts and numerical data is considered of reduced credibility. For example, CASAE's research journal (CJSAE) has seen its funding compromised on at least one occasion because of the perceived scarcity, in its content, of empirically derived research results.

4. Funding

The CASAE Reports contain little information on funding policies and practices for university adult education research. Nonetheless, the writers mention that internal funding represents approximately half the resources available to researchers for doing research. At the risk of overgeneralizing, it could be said that half of all research projects (the "other" half) depends on external funding agencies for support.

In Canada, SSHRC[1] is the single largest source of external funding for research in adult education. From 1981 to 1993, that agency has earmarked between $1,5 million and $4 million yearly for projects in areas related to adult education. These figures, however, should be viewed in their proper perspective. First, SSHRC does not recognize a specific category of funding for adult education. Second, less than one tenth of the overall budget for "education" since 1986 can be traced to adult-related research projects. Third, the overwhelming majority of adult education research supported by SSHRC can be found in a "strategic" funding category called "Education and Work in a Changing Society". This tends to confine research to a limited set of work-related topics. Figure 1 shows the proportion of SSHRC funds allocated respectively to education, adult education, and education and work between 1986 and 1992. Funding for the "education and

(1) *Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada*

work" component is four times higher than the "adult education" category.

| | EDUCATION | | ADULT EDUCATION | | EDUCATION AND WORK | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *n* | *$* | *n* | *$* | *n* | *$* |
| 1986-87 | 27 | 936,386 | 6 | 130,094 | 22 | 459,315 |
| 1987-88 | 57 | 1,655,643 | 3 | 133,509 | 20 | 651,277 |
| 1988-89 | 38 | 1,876,716 | 6 | 465,449 | 25 | 1,875,847 |
| 1989-90 | 52 | 3,211,978 | 6 | 469,336 | 25 | 1,057,172 |
| 1990-91 | 32 | 2,891,867 | 5 | 239,657 | 17 | 1,394,352 |
| 1991-92 | 56 | 3,969,000 | 7 | 468,636 | 14 | 1,083,468 |
| TOTAL | 262 | 14,541,590 | 33 | 1,906,681 | 123 | 6,521,431 |

Figure 1. *SSHRC funding for Education, Adult Education, and Education and Work from 1986 to 1992.*

## Conclusion

The 1993 CASAE papers indicate that the scope and nature of academic research activities in adult education are determined to a significant degree by organizational variables, such as faculty groupings, types of programs offered, and administrative policy. Contrary to what is widely believed, critical, transformative, emancipatory and feminist frameworks are the exception rather than the norm. Qualitative research methodologies are widespread, but suffer from a low credibility rating. Finally, public funding agencies such as SSHRC offer little support for adult education research, unless it is directed towards short term economic problems.

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